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The contribution of white-collar families to the number of dropouts has been widely ignored. There has also been a stereotyping of low-income youngsters that completely overlocks the diversity among the American poor. The fact that Jewish low-income areas have high graduation rates has been used to criticize Negroes as unwilling to help themselves. This criticism ignores the historical basis of literacy among Jews. A further misleading generalization is the assumption that prospective dropouts cannot learn and are alienated from school. Too often the fault lies with teachers and administrators; they may not have learned how to deal with youth who do not fit into the prescribed conditions of school life.

Nine basic remedial programs aimed at solving the dropout problem are cited. Some of these include propaganda campaigns to persuade youth to stay in school, remedial reading programs to overcome deficiencies, attempts to strengthen the relationship of school and family, and vocational education programs. While all of these remedial efforts have attempted to solve one aspect of the dropout problem, the article points to the ineffectiveness of each to help prospective dropouts in their special needs at an early stage.

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SCHOOL DROPOUTS AND AMERICAN SOCIETY*

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SCHOOL DROPOUTS AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

Dropouts--those who do not obtain high school certificates by completing the 12 years of education which start at age 6--are receiving great attention in the United States. Yet, the percentage of dropouts in the United States is declining. The reason for this quickened interest in a smaller percentage is produced by two factors. One is that the school age population is increasing rapidly so that in absolute numbers more are likely to drop out. More important is the growing disadvantage of not having a high school (and college) certificate. The development of new technology demanding new skills, the decline of industries requiring high labor inputs, the destruction of unskilled jobs, and the increased demand for high educational credentials regardless of actual need, have led to the concern about dropouts. Unemployment, now a chronic problem of a sizable plateau level, is greatest among the unskilled and the low-educated.

The issue of dropouts also gains great attention because it intersects the problems of the rising Negro population in the United States. One characteristic response to growing Negro demands for "progress--now" is that Negroes can only obtain it through education which will open new higher-paying jobs to them. (That higher income does not automatically open up housing is ignored in this contention.) The Negro rate of dropouts from schools is high for a variety of reasons and some of the campaign to do something about dropouts is primarily aimed at Negroes.

Controversy is strong among economists on whether unemployment is primarily due to the inadequate growth of the economy or to structural forces which are changing the demand for various occupational skills. In this latter line of reasoning, the stress is that the current supply of labor is inadequate for the demands of today and that the emphasis should be on training and retraining labor so that they can function to perform needed jobs. In the economic growth view, the emphasis is on the inadequate demand for labor; retraining by itself will not solve the problems. Obviously, the concern with dropouts is basically in line with the conservative emphasis on structural changes and training rather than with the more "liberal" concern with the character and growth of the economy.

In either case, the "dropout problem" is part of basic economic and political as well as social issues in the United States. It is frequently seen, however, as a technical or communications problem of convincing youth to stay in school. Discussions are consequently inadequate and frequently misleading.

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First, to some basic data. Hundreds of studies have been written about dropouts. It has been one of the most disappointing experiences of my professional life to wade through them, for so few have any merit. We do not even have good basic figures on the number who are leaving school before graduation. The best informed guess is that the percentage of early school leavers is between one-third and two-fifths of all youth. The Southern states have a disproportionate percentage of dropouts, as they do of all signs of economic stress. While more boys than girls leave school before graduation, the percentage difference is probably of the order--55% boys, 45% girls.

While the overwhelming majority of dropouts are from working-class and farm families, it has been widely ignored that white-collar families make a contibution to the number of dropouts. In Syracuse, New York, a city of 225,000, my associates and I estimate that perhaps one-quarter of dropouts come from white-collar families, particularly those which are in marginal occupational positions. This group is usually ignored in speaking of dropouts and this article will maintain that practice.

Schools within a city vary markedly in dropout rates. A crucial factor, of course, is the socio-economic-ethnic character of the area. The dropout rate can vary from 70% in one low-income district to less than 10% in others. Some schools in low socio-economic areas have much lower rates than others, depending on the nature of the school climate promoted by the school authorities or the traditions of the ethnic group in the area. The fact that many Jewish low-income areas had high graduation rates has been used to criticize Negroes as unwilling to do those things that they can do to help themselves. Criticism of this kind, which is frequently strident and patronizing--implying that "you" should show "us" that you are worthy of help--ignores the historical basis of literacy among Jews and Jewish business experience in the "old country" shtekls. Further, more education is needed today to do well. I have been surprised in looking at data on lowest socio-economic neighborhoods to discover how high a percentage of the Negroes in these areas were high-school graduates.

It is widely asserted that the prospective dropout cannot learn and is alienated from school. Our studies in Syracuse and investigations elsewhere show that the overwhelming majority of those who drop out are capable of doing high school work (as measured by the notoriously class-bound IQ tests). In a study of "presently unemployable" dropouts, an elastic term used to refer to those who were not considered placeable by the state employment service, we found that almost all these boys did not have a negative attitude towards school. Indeed, many felt that teachers were fair although they frequently recounted how one teacher "bugged" them, continually questioning their behavior until an accident occurred which served the teacher as a self-reinforcing prophesy. In other studies, it is clear that students did not come in with a rejection of school even though, as one of our boys stated, "school and I just aren't friends."

My belief is that many youth are bewildered by school and unable to mesh with it. Nor have teachers and administrators been able to learn how to deal with youth who do not neatly fit themselves into the prescribed lock-step of school life. Let me illustrate what I have in mind by recounting an incident that has happened to me a number of times in talking to school personnel. It is a common article of faith among teachers and others that low-income families and their offspring, especially the Negro poor, have little concern with education. Frank Riessman in his important book, The Culturally Deprived Child, has tried to counter this view, but with only limited success. When I point out that Negroes have a very high educational and occupational aspirations, that, indeed, study after study show an extraordinary belief in education among Negroes, the reply invariably is that these aspirations are "unrealistic," that Negroes are jumping from "porters to neurosurgeons." When I declare that this criticism of lack of realism may be true, but that it is different from the complaint that there is no interest in education, I am greeted by puzzled silence. What I think is involved is that many low-income families are unable

to translate their interest in education into effective school behavior by their children. In turn, school personnel do not know how to capitalize on the interest in education among their students, because they have not been willing to reset their procedures so that they work with what exists. Frequently, what is the problem to be dealt with, namely that parents do not know how to help their children in school, is used as an explanation of why school personnel fail to do an adequate job.

One of the elements in the strife is a terrible stereotyping of low-income youngsters. What is believed to be characteristic of the most difficult low-income families and youngsters is generalized to all the poor. The difficulties of the so-called "hard-core," "multi-problem," welfare families are thought to be typical of all the poor. This view is false because of the diversity of the American poor. Of the 20% who are currently described as living below the poverty line, only one-fifth of them receive welfare aid and of this one-fifth only a small group has the characteristics imputed to the "hard-core."

Remedial Programs

Much attention is now being paid to dropouts after a long period of neglect when the "creativity" of the "gifted child" was the ascendant issue. James Conant, former president of Harvard University, former ambassador to Germany, and currently the most influential writer on education in the States, sharpened the issue when he referred to the problems of the dropout as "social dynamite." In his Slums and Suburbs, an eloquent plea for attention to dropouts as well as a defense of educational segregation of Negroes and their training for minor occupational niches in society, Conant reported that in some Negro neighborhoods of large cities, as many as 70% of out-of-school youth were unemployed. Delinquency, crime, economic dependency, familial instability, violence flowed from this situation.

Some programs had begun before this, primarily to improve the programs of schools in low-income areas, but since then more direct attention has been devoted to dropouts.

It is difficult to isolate special programs beamed at dropouts because many programs, frequently aided by Ford Foundation grants, aimed at the "educationally disadvantaged," at those attending schools in the "gray areas" of large cities, primarily benefit prospective dropouts.

(1) President Kennedy in August initiated a program to convince recent dropouts to return to school when it opened in September. In general, a heavy propaganda campaign is underweigh to exhort youth to stay in school. I am not impressed with its great success and sometimes fear that it boomerangs. Dropout youth may be convinced that it is not worthwhile to try very much to improve their circumstances since possibilities are said to be so slight. In any case, persuasion has to be accomplished by a change in school that facilitates learning.

(2) Reading deficiencies are a leading factor in school failure; school retardation in turn is common, though not universal, among dropouts. Consequently, many schools are paying special attention to improving reading achievement among students. Unfortunately, there seems to be more attention

paid to remedial reading than to learning how to teach reading effectively the first time around. I am constantly amazed at how little is really known about the process of reading. There are investigations, especially by Martin Deutsch's Institute of Developmental Studies, of how social class factors in family environment and cognitive style limit the reading ability of low-income youth. At the same time, others feel that this emphasis, which has been affected by Basil Bernstein's work, exaggerates the deficiencies of low-income youth and places the burden on them rather than making their cognitive style the problematic for the school.

(3) One way of dealing with different cognitive styles is to bring low-income youngsters to school at an earlier age in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten situations so that they can be prepared for school. Of course, this policy meets the problem of dropouts by making sure they have the standard 12 years of education by tacking the years that are lost by early school leaving on to the beginning period! The inadequacy of nurseries and other facilities for low-income families in the United States is shocking and the desirability of bringing children into the orbit of the schools at an earlier age is defendable on those grounds alone.

(4) Many schools in low-income areas are beginning to attempt closer relationships with the families of youth. The school-community relationship is seen as important. In the Banneker district of St. Louis, a Negro ghetto, associate superintendent Samuel Sheppard has families sign pledge cards that they will provide study opportunities for their youth. In some situations, unfortunately, much of the school-community relationship is only front and little serious and sincere concern for the family is manifested. In my more cynical moments, I have the feeling that many programs aimed at the low-income areas are primarily Potemkin villages, constructed to permit school personnel to grind out publicity releases on their mimeograph machines in order to advance their own careers. But this is unduly pessimistic since many of the professionals are dedicated people.

(5) Most programs involve additional expenditures to reduce classroom size and to add specialized personnel (counselors, psychologists, teacher helpers). Slum schools have traditionally been understaffed resulting in overcrowded classes. Smaller classes are undoubtedly necessary where learning difficulties are compounded by language barriers (as with Spanish-background children) and school adjustment problems. The independent contribution of reduced classroom size and specialized personnel have not been, however, adequately measured.

The most publicized kind of activity has been that of "Higher Horizons", initiated by genial Daniel Schreiber and now copied elsewhere. The aim is to provide new kinds of "cultural" experiences to low-income youth who have frequently had little contact outside of their ghettos.

Patterns of residential segregation along racial lines in the United States raise special difficulties. Efforts to upgrade long-neglected schools in low-income areas often maintain existing segregation patterns. Some school systems have been criticized for paying inadequate attention to de facto segregation and trying to stifle criticism by providing separate but equal schools in ghetto areas.

(6) More important in my opinion than specific programs is the effort to change the attitudes and behavior of teachers and personnel so that they are dedicated to working effectively with low-income youth. The climate of a school affects much of what takes place in it; in a visit to a school one soon senses how the staff feel towards the students for this orientation permeates the school. Teachers are increasingly involved in training programs to improve their competences in educating the "educationally disadvantaged." Unfortunately, much of the social science and education literature is inadequate and frequently misleading in regard to working-class populations.

(7) Just beginning are efforts to revamp vocational education, which is a broad term covering school efforts to increase direct occupation competences of students. Vocational education has been stultified for more than a generation and the funds in this field are still primarily spent for preparation for agricultural occupations and home economics. The Federal government and the Ford Foundation are trying to break through the bureaucratic encrustations in the field but it is difficult to be hopeful. In many communities, technical education has been emphasized but the selection policy has been strict so that less adequate students are barred from these programs. Where no alternative of less technical program exists, as is frequently the case, the slow learner has no opportunity to pick up marketable skills.

(8) Schools are just beginning to pay attention to the possibility that many dropouts may return to school. Our studies in Syracuse indicate that from 10% to 25% of dropouts go on for further training. Unfortunately, no special efforts are made to facilitate further training. A great necessity is for a new view of the educational process--that many may leave school for a year or more and then return, that experience and performance may qualify individuals for high school diplomas and for college scholarships, etc. This kind of flexibility does not now exist in American schools, although some glimmer of the importance of flexibility and alternative routes and schedules of educational progress is beginning to emerge. For example, the Ford Foundation, which has been at the center of educational experimentation, particularly for low-income groups, has recently given funds to support a program at the University of Toledo to permit older dropouts of ability to enter college directly without first obtaining high-school certificates.

(9) A variety of programs are now aimed at the out-of-school youth. Many communities, especially those which have received grants from the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency for comprehensive planning of youth services, have developed training programs for unemployed dropouts. The programs have some diversity and it is too early to be sure of their impact. My impression is, however, that many if not most of them are beamed at the most disadvantaged youth and do not develop technical competence. Rather, the aim is to encourage "good work habits." I have strong doubts that in the present labor market situation of the United States, "good work habits" will open up many jobs for youth, especially for Negroes. If these programs fail, continuous sheltered workshop programs providing employment for youth may be the next emphasis.

The problem of dropouts cannot be extricated from the basic changes taking place in American society. Education is increasingly the route to mobility; credentialism consequently grows. High unemployment, low economic growth and concern for racial desegregation force special attention to the education of low-income groups.

Much is already known that would help prevent dropouts or improve their situation. The push to do something in the highly decentralized American education structure is not always there. To some extent the problems are caste problems more than pedagogical ones. Education, in my opinion, will increasingly be a political issue in America as the disinherited strive to open the educational escape hatch from the marginal economy of poverty into the main economy of "the affluent society."

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